

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS IN GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER RESEARCH

Lessons from a Time of Crisis

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Concluding Remarks: Methods and the Future of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller-related Research

Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco

Introduction

The field of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT)-related research is undergoing an important moment of transformation. Since the mid-2010s the number of publications has grown exponentially. Scholars are increasingly acknowledging the power dynamics and inequalities that might be (re)produced through research practices. Debates around the decolonization of Romani studies are gaining traction. Most significantly, the number of academics of GRT background working with and for GRT communities is slowly rising. Already before the pandemic, the necessity to take stock of the methodological implications of these developments was clear. As a diverse community of scholars, we needed to examine whether our working methods, in the field and at our desks, were changing in tandem with these transformations, and how. Then came COVID-19. As researchers under lockdown attempted to document the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on marginalized GRT communities (see, for example, [Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023](#)), many questioned the viability of their projects and scrutinized anew their methodological approaches, roles and responsibilities.

The authors gathered in this volume responded to these challenges by innovating while engaging ongoing debates about the ethics and politics of research and about its role in shaping practical interventions. Their chapters embody and assess these intertwined processes. The authors speak about the choices and compromises that they made to keep their projects going, reflect on the ethical and political implications of these shifts, and propose further fruitful avenues for methodological development. In this brief conclusion

we review their most significant contributions and their potential impact on future developments in the field of GRT-related research.

Strategies towards decolonization

The decolonization of the academy and of academic knowledge is one of the key concerns presently driving debate among scholars working on GRT-related issues (see, for example, [Carmona 2018](#); [Baar, 2020](#); [Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020](#); [Brooks et al, 2022](#); [Hrešanová, 2023](#)).¹ Decolonization is variously depicted as a metaphor for critiquing power relations and dominant narratives; as a tool for countering the epistemic violence and structuring effects of antigypsyism; as a challenge to the hegemonic suppression of non-normative modes of being in the world; and as a mechanism for progressive social transformation. What decolonization might involve in concrete methodological terms, both within the field of GRT research broadly defined and within specific research projects, has received less elaboration and is one of the core questions explored by the contributors to this book. As editors and non-GRT academics, we have eschewed proposing any parameters for decolonization and have instead encouraged individual authors to spell out how they are engaging these current conversations through methodological innovation in their work.

Contributors have answered in a variety of ways, both practically through experimental writing styles that foreground issues of voice and authority, and theoretically through reflections on the ethnographer's role as GRT or non-GRT scholar confronting the marginalization and oppression of GRTs. [Chapter 4](#) by Antonio Montañés Jiménez and Demetrio Gómez Ávila and [Chapter 8](#) by Stefano Piemontese and Luxa Leoco are presented as attempts to engage non-academic interlocutors in knowledge production and to make GRT voices heard in research practice. These chapters witness to the labour and commitment involved in attempting to transform methods and writing in ways that would make them better attuned to the priorities and skills of interlocutors. In [Chapter 9](#), David Friel narrates the practical and emotional challenges he met as an Irish Traveller and Master's student attempting to carry out research with and for his own Irish Traveller community under lockdown. He presses on scholars the need to discard their expectations about expertise and to learn from GRT knowledge-making strategies when developing participatory research methods. For Friel the primary purpose of this methodological shift should not be a more precise or even more ethical form of academic knowledge but bringing about a project of social transformation that would be shaped by communities themselves.

Tackling the same problem as a non-GRT anthropologist, in [Chapter 5](#) Marco Solimene challenges ethnographers to decentre their own understandings of social justice in order to pay heed to how communities

themselves choose or not to resist and why. He argues that scholars need to pay attention to how the communities with whom they work do politics and to support them in preserving their control over representation and its terms. In contrasting ways, both Friel and Solimene encourage researchers to consider what localized and even ‘counter-hegemonic’ GRT theories of power and resistance may look like. They ask that readers challenge their own taken-for-granted knowledge about the politics of research, that they consider whose interests are being served by particular research practices and that they assess how researchers formulate their questions.

Questioning research roles and relations

All contributors put forward concrete strategies for strengthening the critical analysis of researcher and interlocutor roles and capabilities. They candidly and rigorously scrutinize the complexities of so-called ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ positions, and review their own assumptions about what these might entail. Roma anthropologist Iliana Sarafian (Chapter 6) and Irish Traveller sociologist David Friel (Chapter 9) foreground affect and emotional involvement – which in more positivist renderings that value distance might be dismissed as bias – as a source of insight. Non-GRT authors critically scrutinize their own standpoints and positionality within a pandemic context that foregrounded the multiple distances separating them from their interlocutors, and that made them question the nature of their ethnographic immersion (see, for example, Chapter 7 by Nathalie Manrique and Chapter 10 by Ana Chirițoiu).

All the chapters in the volume put relations between ethnographers and others – communities, participants, interlocutors, research assistants – centre stage, foregrounding the fact that ethnographers always learn and theorize in cooperation with, and thanks to the help of, others, whether this is acknowledged or not.² The strategies the authors use for bringing to the surface previously unexamined aspects of these relationships vary. Manrique deploys her failure to learn under lockdown to zoom in on her reliance on research participants’ cooperation and insights in non-pandemic times. Sarafian (Chapter 6) discusses embodied autoethnography and the exploration of researcher emotions as a way to trace links and disconnections between researcher and participant. Piemontese and Leoco (Chapter 8) describe the process of carving out a space for ethnographic collaboration between ethnographer and interlocutor through the continuous joint acknowledgement of vulnerability and uncertainty. Both Friel (Chapter 9) and Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila (Chapter 4) put forward models of engaged research that are unabashedly political and that straddle the divide between activism and research. Lastly, in our own Chapter 3 we analyse the ethical and practical challenges that emerge out of the increasing turn

to collaborative research on the one hand, and of the growing reliance on the help of local research assistants on the other.

Working with limits, failures and lacunas

Despite their diverse methodological orientations, all of the chapters in this volume testify to authors' commitment to their ethnographic research projects. However, like many other scholars attempting to carry out research under lockdown in 2020 and 2021, the authors in this volume all confronted the very real possibility that these projects would fail. And so, underlying every chapter is the acknowledgement of limits, failures and lacunas, and of the central role they play within research – both in the extraordinary conditions generated by the pandemic and more broadly.

The authors describe how, while the first two years of the pandemic put constraints on their work (such as travel bans), the period also presented them with opportunities to learn, in new ways, new things about the social worlds under investigation and about their own place in it as researchers. Although the severe lockdowns stymied some research projects, they also required researchers to critically examine taken-for-granted methodological practices and research relationships, and challenged them to experiment with research design and methods. The situation demanded that they ask themselves clearly what motivated their research and what they wanted to learn about the social life, and whether relevant insights could or could not be gained even during the period of decreased mobility and social distancing. In turn, as a social phenomenon, the crisis also made more clearly visible aspects of social life more easily disregarded in non-pandemic times, pushing scholars to look upon existing data sets from new perspectives – a process explored in depth by Ana Chirițoiu in [Chapter 10](#).

Like many ethnographers, once the contributors to this volume found that they could not continue researching face to face, they diversified their research methods and contexts, stitching them together, covering lacunas in their ethnographic observations with 'patches' that originated from other data sources ([Higgins et al, 2017](#)). Digital and remote technologies became essential research tools – here to stay in post-pandemic times³ – as well as complex research objects in themselves, as Solimene discusses in [Chapter 5](#). Sometimes, by triangulating diverse kinds of data from multiple sources (previous ethnographic experiences, archival, quantitative and so forth), ethnographers such as Manrique ([Chapter 7](#)) were able to identify patterns and relationships overlooked in earlier work.

While these 'patchwork' approaches (see also [Günel et al, 2020](#)) might provide some advantages over more rigid research designs, they also require continued commitment to reflexivity and recursive evaluation, and therefore a thorough awareness of the provisionality of one's conclusions

(Fotta and Gay y Blasco, [Chapter 3](#)). Some patches, after all, might need to be unstitched and reorganized. Beyond the pandemic, what contributors such as Piemontese and Leoco, Solimene, Manrique, Sarafian and Chirițoiu evidence is the processual character of ethnographic knowledge, and the need to confront and build on this instability methodologically – in the field, when writing up and in the final text itself. One of the most innovative and relevant contributions of the chapters in this volume is the fact that authors demonstrate ways to work with, rather than against, doubt, hesitation and ignorance.

This emphasis on failure, provisionality and reflexivity as fieldwork methods, and as methods of analysis, means that researcher emotions come to the fore as essential to the research process. While this emotional engagement of researcher with their work often delivers useful insights that become essential to the evolution of a project, it can also be very challenging and difficult to manage. In [Chapter 9](#), Friel argues that self-care activities should be rethought as an integral part of the ethnographic toolkit (see also [Theidon, 2014](#); [Yates-Doerr 2020](#)). In other words, besides a core methodological training in how to build rapport, how to practise self-reflexivity or be attentive to power hierarchies, researchers planning projects need to anticipate how they might care for themselves. Researchers must find their own way to ‘hold space for our own emotions in the field’ ([Backe, 2017](#)), while deciding also what place to give to those emotions, and to their analytical potential, in their writing ([Behar, 1997](#)).

Communicating knowledge

The conceptualization of ethnographic research that we have described earlier emphasizes the relational, provisional and reflexive nature of knowledge, and locates methods firmly within the landscape of the politics of social science research. This conceptualization has implications also for how findings and analysis are presented to audiences (and indeed for what counts as findings and as analysis). Published ethnographic texts should not be treated as definitive ([Smolka, 2021](#); [Verran, 2021](#)), and the chapters in this book are explicitly presented as tentative, open-ended moments within research trajectories that we hope will be critically engaged with by readers (compare [Gay y Blasco, 2017](#)).

We recognize, and the chapters evidence, that choices with regard to the communication of research are not just methodological or aesthetic, but ethical and political, and must be approached as such. As editors, we encouraged contributors to experiment with genre and voice, to dare to write experimentally and tentatively as much as assertively, and above all to reflect explicitly on the potential effects of their writing strategies. We therefore decided to collect the papers in an edited volume rather than a

journal special issue, since academic journals tend towards homogeneity in structure, style, voice and presentation, and endorse rather restrictive views of scholarly rigour. We also invited junior scholars and those who do not have permanent (or even any) academic position. Furthermore, Montañés Jiménez and Piemontese co-authored their contributions (Chapters 4 and 8, respectively) with GRT interlocutors who would not normally write for academic audiences. In these various ways the book extends approaches that we formulated in previous work (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023), where we attempted to help shift what counts as ethnographic knowledge and expertise in GRT-related research.

Throughout this volume, writing strategies are revealed as methodological choices which have the potential to challenge hierarchies between academics and others, and to begin to decentre hegemonic ways of knowing. Piemontese and Leoco contribute to an emergent genre of GRT ethnographic writing in which an academic and a non-academic write ethnography together while analysing the collaborative process itself (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020). Their chapter recounts also how their collaboration has encouraged Leoco to write autobiographical short stories, pointing to the intertwining of academic and other ways of learning and representing. The autoethnographic piece by Sarafian (Chapter 6) deploys the exploration of personal vulnerability and affective sharing as a means to scrutinize the character of the ethnographer's authority. She experiments with style and voice in ways that encourage readers to reflect on the complex role of academic writing in the decolonial enterprise.

By bending academic genres, and by producing texts that challenge scholarly expectations of authority, hierarchy and expertise, the authors in this volume ask audiences to widen their understanding of what outputs of academic value should look like. Yet we also know that these strategies have many limits. For authors wanting to communicate GRT-related research in effective ways beyond the academic ivory tower, experimenting with multimodality is centrally important.⁴ GRT groups continue to be deliberately and strongly excluded from access to literacy. It is therefore essential that scholars devise methods to share their findings, not just with other scholars but with research participants and local communities, in diverse written and non-written formats without compromising complexity, depth and rigour. To invite researchers to imagine how they might achieve this, Tamsin Cavaliero (Chapter 2) has produced graphic summaries of each of the chapters. Readers should examine the gaps and overlaps between text and illustration as a way to consider what written formats can and cannot accomplish.

Building outwards from the pandemic moment, and from work with GRT groups, the chapters in this volume investigate the purpose and direction

of social scientific work in general. Although most authors here are not directly concerned with applied research or with research-informed practice, they pose important questions about the roles that the social sciences can play in facilitating social transformation. How can the social sciences be an arena where positive social changes are achieved and not just discussed? How can social science help to shape social priorities in the post-pandemic world? These are large questions, for debate and reflection in the academic community at large, but they are also immediate, practical questions for researchers planning and implementing their own projects, whatever the scale. Although they have many potential replies, the authors writing in this volume demonstrate that any answer must necessarily revolve around methods, that change starts close at hand, in the immediacy of one's daily work, and that it starts with practice and action, not with theory and argument. These authors show that, by paying close attention to research methods, it is possible to carry out engaged research – research that is relevant, reflexive, responsible and responsive – even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Notes

- ¹ The interest in reflecting on ways that decolonization of the production of knowledge is and should be practised in relation to GRT communities is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that, as we write this, a group of Polish Roma and non-Roma researchers are organizing a special journal issue (Fiałkowska et al, 2023), and a special issue on the topic is being prepared by the Czech journal *Romano Džaniben* (Ort, 2023).
- ² For more recent discussions of these issues see Weiss, 2021; McGranahan 2022. For a critical distinction between co-theorizing and reciprocal ethnography, see Gay y Blasco and Hernandez, 2020, 171.
- ³ See, for instance, Marzi and Tarr (2023).
- ⁴ For instance, Piemontese's long-term collaboration with a Roma fieldwork assistant, Lauren Ionescu, has resulted in the production of video diaries. As the pandemic broke out, which inhibited Piemontese's travels, he sent Ionescu a smartphone and invited him to record his life (see <https://vimeo.com/stefanpiemontese>).

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